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SUBJECT: UNESCO DIRECTOR GENERAL RACE

Classified by Ambassador Louise V. Oliver. Reason 1.4 (b, c, and d)

This is an action message. See Para. 12.

¶1. (C) Summary: The race to succeed UNESCO Director-General Matsuura (Japan) is on in earnest, even though UNESCO's General Conference will not make the final selection until October 2009. Egypt's Culture Minister Farouk Husni was the first to enter the race, but he has hurt his chances with a serious anti-Semitic gaffe in a speech before the Egyptian Parliament. Among others, the French, who supported him early on, may be looking for a way out of this promise. Another Arab candidate, Morocco's PermRep Aziza Benani, has come forward, and Bulgaria's PermRep Irina Bukova has thrown her hat in the ring too. Lithuania's PermRep Ina Marciulionyte plans to do likewise after UNESCO's October Executive Board meeting. Although both the Arabs and eastern Europeans have never had a director-general and are thus claiming that it is now their turn, there is no clear requirement that the job go to them. Candidates may also emerge in Latin America. Deputy Director-General Marcio Barbosa is considering a run but may not yet have the support of his government which is also considering backing a former education minister. Even former Colombian President Pastrana indicated recently to Ambassador Oliver that he is considering a running. Given the high stakes and the relatively weak field of candidates currently in the race, it is in U.S. interest that there be as many candidates as possible to choose from. End Summary.

¶2. (C) UNESCO member delegations are increasingly consumed with the competition to succeed Director-General Koichiro Matsuura (Japan) whose term expires in November 2009. Much rides on this. His successor should be someone who will continue Matsuura's sound administrative/management reforms, while winning member state trust and giving the Organization greater vision and panache than the cautious Matsuura has been able to impart. It would be all too easy for the wrong candidate to permit the Organization to become highly politicized and to resume the hiring of unqualified cronies as happened during the reigns of Matsuura's immediate predecessors.

¶3. (U) Decisions on the procedure to be followed for the election of Matsuura's successor will be taken at the next session of UNESCO's 58-member Executive Board in October of this year. In September 2009, the Executive Board will examine responses and recommend a candidate to the General Conference which groups all 193 member states. The General Conference will make the final choice at its next session in October 2009.

¶4. (SBU) Arab states argue that it is their turn to have the top job, as none of UNESCO's past directors-general have come from the Middle East. Egypt, in particular, has moved out strongly, formally launching Culture Minister Farouk Husni's candidacy even before UNESCO's last General Conference in the autumn of 2007. The first to enter the field, Egypt moved vigorously to round up support among the Arab states and beyond in an attempt to sew things up before any serious rivals could emerge. They appeared to have obtained an important endorsement when French President Sarkozy reportedly gave his blessing to Husni during a visit to Egypt last autumn. (Comment: As the host country with a long record of active support for UNESCO, France will have a major voice in the selection of Matsuura's successor. While the French have not shared with us their criteria, we assume that they will be insistent as always that whoever is chosen be able to speak French. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) Husni's chances have taken a nosedive more recently. First, he is no longer the only Arab candidate. Morocco has espoused the candidacy of Aziza Benani, Morocco's UNESCO PermRep and herself a

former Culture Minister. (N.B. Benani's English is extremely weak.) More important, he made an enormous gaffe in question-time in the Egyptian Parliament in May. Questioned by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood about the alleged presence of Israeli books in Egyptian libraries, he strongly denied there were any and challenged his questioner to produce one. If he did, Husni announced he would burn it immediately. Not surprisingly, Israel has since come out strongly against Husni, but Husni's problems extend far beyond Israel. The image of a potential UNESCO director-general burning books does not sit well with many members, and Husni's subsequent efforts to explain himself, in which he has not retracted what he is reported to have said, have only dug the hole deeper. The Egyptian ambassador we are told is a nervous wreck and trying to explain to everyone that he was somehow misunderstood.

¶16. (C) Significantly, French officials, whose support for Husni was never more than tepid, seem to be looking for a way withdraw from an embarrassing commitment. France's new UNESCO ambassador, Catherine Colonna (protect), who claims to be well-connected to the current French administration, told Ambassador Oliver on June 6 that she did not think an Arab would be a suitable UNESCO director-general. When asked, how that squared with Sarkozy's commitment to Husni, she replied that Sarkozy tends to make off the cuff remarks. Colonna agreed that the U.S. and France are two countries with the greatest influence on the outcome, and that we must try to agree on a candidate.

¶17. (C) With Husni appearing to stumble, candidates are emerging in
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Group II, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, which has also never produced a director-general. Bulgaria's UNESCO PermRep Irina Bukova told Ambassador Oliver on June 11 that she is now her country's official candidate. We understand that Bulgaria's president publicly announced her candidacy at a meeting of Southeast European heads of state in Athens earlier this month. According to Bukova, the Bulgarian Prime Minister will seek U.S. support for her during his meeting with the President in Washington on July 15.

¶18. (C) Bukova is not, however, the only Eastern European angling for the job. Lithuania's PermRep Ina Marciulionyte has informed Ambassador Oliver that she too plans to be a candidate. She says she has the firm backing of her president and plans to make her candidacy known after UNESCO's October 2008 Executive Board meeting. (N.B. The Board is expected to agree at this meeting to send a letter to all member states asking them to propose candidates.) Ambassador Marciulionyte's candidacy has already drawn a reaction from her Bulgarian rival. Ambassador Bukova has told Ambassador Oliver that Lithuania's backing for Marciulionyte is not firm, and that Bulgaria has already approached Lithuania to ask that she not proceed with her candidacy. Marciulionyte says she will not withdraw and firmly denies that her government is having second thoughts about her.

¶19. (C) Despite the claims of the Arabs and Eastern Europeans, there is no formal requirement that the next director-general come from either region. Viable candidates may thus also emerge in Latin America or elsewhere. Current Deputy Director-General Marcio Barbosa (Brazil) wants to run and claimed some months ago to have the backing of his government. The Brazilian PermRep told Ambassador Oliver on June 11, however, that the Brazilian Government has not made a decision whether or not to back Barbosa. The Brazilian Government is also considering nominating a former Brazilian education minister. The Brazilian ambassador told us that he will make a recommendation to his government in July.

¶10. (C) Finally, former Colombian President Andres Pastrana who attended a June 15-17 UNESCO Conference on the violent radicalization of youth, asked Ambassador Oliver whether it was true that the next director-general had to be an Arab. When told this was not the case, he responded that he was interested in running but had not made a final decision.

¶11. (C) Comment: In our view, the field of candidates so far is relatively weak. It would be very premature to make any decisions. We should encourage more candidates to enter the race and widen our scope for choice, and we should be on our guard for

misrepresentations from the candidates and their governments. The contradictory assertions we have already received about who does and does not have the support of his/her government are the first, but probably not the last, efforts to mislead us.

¶12. (C) Action Requested: We should look before we leap. The U.S. should look carefully at the backgrounds of various candidates who have emerged so far to see whether there is anything in their past of which we should be aware. We would be particularly interested in an all-source assessment of the Bulgarian candidate, Irina Bukova and her relationship with the current Russian Culture Minister (until recently Russia's ambassador to France). Given Russia's strong historical relationship with Bulgaria, we would expect the Russians to support Bukova. Their support, however, could come with some significant strings attached. Post also requests a careful assessment of former Colombian President Pastrana. Given the weakness of the field, he could have a chance if the Latins were to rally behind him.

OLIVER